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# What Went Wrong: Why the US's State-building Efforts Failed in the War in Afghanistan

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**What Went Wrong: Why the US's State-building  
Efforts Failed in the War in Afghanistan**

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Political Science

4/26/16

“Easy to march into, and hard to march out of.”

-Alexander the Great, on Afghanistan<sup>1</sup>

## Background to War and State-Building

### I. Introduction/Research Question

As the United States learned, Alexander the Great was right. The War in Afghanistan was designed to be the first blow in the “Global War on Terror.” The US wanted to take decisive military action against the organization that had perpetrated the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, as well as the regime that provided them with a safe haven. The US’s dream of a unified, peaceful, and democratic Afghanistan now lies in tatters. While the Obama administration has claimed to have decimated the core of al-Qaeda, the American conflict in Afghanistan has failed to bring about a stable Afghan state. State-building as it was originally conceptualized seems like a farce, as the US-backed government does not seem capable of pushing back against the Taliban insurgency or governing the whole country. As US military involvement draws to a close, the time has come to reflect on what went wrong, and why state-building failed in Afghanistan. The war has cost the United States nearly \$1 trillion dollars by some estimates<sup>2</sup>, and has resulted in nearly 2,500 US casualties in addition to hundreds of additional casualties from coalition countries.<sup>3</sup> 2015 was the deadliest year in Afghanistan ever recorded, with over 11,000 deaths.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the practical implications of examining why such an enormous investment did not result in a stable

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<sup>1</sup> John Oldale, *A World of Curiosities: Surprising, Interesting, and Downright Unbelievable Facts from Every Nation on the Planet*, 7.

<sup>2</sup> Geoff Dyer, Chloe Sorvino

<sup>3</sup> “Coalition Military Fatalities”

<sup>4</sup> “Afghan Civilian Deaths and Injuries”

Afghan state, a serious reflection on state-building is critical for determining American security policy over the decades ahead. With two recent high-profile cases of failed state-building efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan, the US has learned the hard way about the difficulty in attempting to construct an entire democratic state from the ground up. A serious reflection on what went wrong in Afghanistan is not only due to the American taxpayers and to the families of those killed or injured in the conflict, it is vital for US policymakers to realize that the lessons of state-building in Afghanistan provide key strategic insights for how to approach combatting terrorist organizations in the future.

While a debate currently rages in this country over the merits of sending ground troops into Iraq and Syria to combat the threat posed by the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL), it often seems forgotten that the United States already has nearly 10,000 troops involved in a war in Western Asia. The war seems often ignored in our country's political discourse, and receives a fraction of the airtime or attention that the air campaign against ISIL receives. It has long been perceived as a "second tier" conflict compared to the War in Iraq or ongoing coalition efforts to combat ISIL. Like the War in Iraq, the War in Afghanistan is a conflict that has evolved over time to encompass various different strategic objectives. What was once viewed as a grand project to transform Afghanistan into a thriving, developed liberal democracy is now largely viewed as a narrower mission to combat terrorist threats to the United States and to augment the capacity of the Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) to combat the Taliban and to prop up a central government that appears increasingly weak and vulnerable. Most academics and analysts of the conflict agree that the project of building a viable, liberal democratic state in Afghanistan has failed. The schools of thought on state-building in Afghanistan generally

agree that from the onset, the neoconservative vision of what state-building would look like was unrealistic and based on faulty assumptions. The real divide between experts on the War in Afghanistan is over how state-building in Afghanistan went so wrong, and what the United States should have done differently. This paper will answer the core research question, **“Why did state-building fail in Afghanistan?”**

For the sake of clarity, the schools of thought on this issue are divided into the “do-more” and “do-less” schools in this paper. The do-more school argues that it was in the strategic interest of the US to state-build in Afghanistan, but that it was done incorrectly. This school of thought contends that the US has a vested strategic interest in remaining involved in Afghanistan for the foreseeable future, and doubling down on efforts to defeat the Taliban and build a viable state by utilizing smarter policy and different strategies. The do-more school not only believes in a need to fundamentally transform Afghanistan politically, but societally and economically as well. This school believes that sustained investment in state-building in Afghanistan is the key to suppressing the ability of the Taliban, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist organizations to operate in the country. The do-less school believes that it was never in the strategic interest of the United States to attempt state-building in Afghanistan, and that the US should have only focused on a narrow military campaign waged against the organization that perpetrated the 9/11 attacks, as well as other terrorist organizations that pose a threat to the US. The do-less school varies regarding the extent to which the Afghan government should have been supported, but the consensus is that the US should not have attempted to push liberal, democratic values on the post-Taliban government, and that the US should not have focused much energy on the nature of the Afghan state. The do-less

school as defined in this paper does not argue that Afghanistan does not have the capacity to become a liberal democracy – only that the US should never have attempted to foist a democratic government on Afghanistan from the outside. The do-less camp does not necessarily believe that the US needs to withdraw its entire military presence from Afghanistan, but they believe that instead of fighting a protracted counterinsurgency campaign against the Taliban, the US should focus on terrorists that pose a direct threat to the United States, such as al-Qaeda or ISIL. The US should shift its focus away from the Taliban, which has more regional ambitions and is mostly interested in attacking the Afghan national government, not the United States. In short, from the perspective of the US government, Afghanistan would become another battlefield in the fight against terrorism akin to Yemen, Somalia, Libya, and other countries where the US takes targeted action against the leadership of organizations that pose a threat to the West.

After weighing the relative merits of both schools of thought, the analysis and conclusion sections come down firmly on the side of the do-less school. By attempting to engineer the nature of the post-Taliban Afghan state, the United States embraced a fundamental reshaping of Afghan society in an attempt to create a liberal democracy as its mission. The US should have undertaken a much narrower mission from the start, focusing only on direct threats to the US and its allies. Since the end of NATO's combat mission, the security situation has only deteriorated further in the country. The Obama administration's attempts to both end the American presence in Afghanistan and to prevent the country from descending into civil war would seem to be incompatible. Afghanistan will surely be on the national security docket of the next president, and many of the same debates over more or less American involvement in the country will

undoubtedly play out in national security circles for years to come. The do-less school is ultimately correct because it is doubtful that continued investment in state-building would produce tangible results for the United States. A narrower focus that only targets direct threats to the United States would be a more cost-effective strategy for advancing American interests in the region. State-building in Afghanistan has proven to be a futile attempt to convert Afghan society to into a liberal democracy from the outside, and moving forward, the US needs to have a narrower counterterrorism mission in the country.

This paper will begin by examining some of the historical context that grounds the American War in Afghanistan, which is essential for understanding some of the fundamentals about the country with regard to armed conflict. The background section also explores the US's impetus for the war, detailing the close relationship between the Taliban and al-Qaeda that prompted the US invasion following 9/11. The historical background section is followed by a section that outlines the neoconservative foreign policy as applied to Afghanistan in order to understand the motivation for state-building within the context of the broader post-9/11 foreign policy of the Bush Administration. The next section examines some of the core concepts and theories that underpin state-building in order to further contextualize state-building in Afghanistan. This section utilizes both documents from the federal government and the writings of authors such as Francis Fukuyama. After these contextualizing sections, the two schools of thought are presented within the literature review. The "do-more" and "do-less" schools are presented with a thorough examination of the thinkers and authors within each respective school of thought. Following the literature review, the analysis section examines the relative merits

of both schools, and makes a judgement about which school is more correct. The conclusion builds on the analysis section to offer concrete policy recommendations, with some predictions on what will happen in Afghanistan in the years to come.

## **II. The Roots of the War in Afghanistan**

The United States is certainly not the first country to get mired in a protracted conflict against an Afghan insurgency. Alexander the Great, the Mughal Empire, The United Kingdom, and the Soviet Union are among the many great powers that became mired in unsuccessful military campaigns in the country. An exploration of the long and complex history of Afghanistan would take a book, and is beyond the scope of this paper. However, it is useful to understand some of the basics of Afghan history during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in order to comprehend the events that led to the American invasion in 2001. In 1926, the independent Kingdom of Afghanistan was established as a successor state to the Emirate of Afghanistan, which had existed as a British protectorate since the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Mohammed Zahir Shah, an ethnic Pashtun, ruled the country from 1933 through 1973. During his reign, he attempted to modernize the country, and introduced a number of progressive and liberal reforms. However, the Kingdom of Afghanistan was a highly centralized political entity that did not permeate much of civil society outside of Kabul or other major population centers.<sup>5</sup> Following several years of political turmoil, a Soviet-backed socialist government took control of Afghanistan in 1978, but quickly came into conflict with Islamist forces, who seized control over many tribal portions of the country. The Soviet Union intervened on behalf of the socialist government, and became mired in a conflict that saw the USSR lose almost 15 thousand soldiers in a

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<sup>5</sup> Barnett R. Rubin, *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 110.



protracted, bloody, and ultimately unsuccessful attempt to defeat the mujahedeen and retain the authority of a socialist central government in the country.<sup>6</sup> The United States and Saudi Arabia provided covert assistance to the Islamist forces fighting against the Soviet proxy government, and the Soviet Union was forced to withdraw from the country. Following the exit of the Soviet Union, US assistance to Afghanistan stopped flowing. After a period of civil war between several rival Islamist factions in the 1990's, the Taliban seized de facto control of Afghanistan in 1996, although they did not control all of the country.

One of the most important documents explaining the prelude to the War in Afghanistan is the 9/11 Commission Report, which details al-Qaeda's planning process for the 9/11 attacks. The Taliban government was supported by Pakistan, who thought that they could use the Taliban as a proxy to prevent Indian influence in Afghanistan. One of the Taliban's chief rivals was the Northern Alliance, which controlled some of Afghanistan and was composed of ethnic Uzbeks, Hazara Shias, and Pashtuns disillusioned with the Taliban. The Northern Alliance was led by Ahmad Shah Massoud, who was assassinated by the Taliban on September 9, 2001. In the late 1990's, Osama bin Laden, who had been targeted in Africa by the Clinton administration, moved to Afghanistan, struck up an alliance with Taliban leader Mullah Omar, and set up training camps in the country.<sup>7</sup>

In 1998, Osama bin Laden, his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri and other top al-Qaeda leadership issued a public fatwa against "Jews and Crusaders," and proclaimed a Muslim

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<sup>6</sup> Kenneth Katzman, 2015. *Afghanistan: Post-Taliban Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 2.

<sup>7</sup> Thomas H. Kean, et al, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 67.

responsibility to kill Americans. In August of 1998, the US launched Tomahawk missile strikes on al-Qaeda training camps in Afghanistan in an attempt to eliminate bin Laden, but missed him by a couple hours. The United States then warned they would hold Sudan or Afghanistan responsible for any acts of terror committed by organizations within their borders. The US also designated the Taliban as an official state sponsor of terrorism.<sup>8</sup> Beginning in 1998, US intelligence increasingly suggested that al-Qaeda would attempt to strike at the US by hijacking civilian aircraft.<sup>9</sup> Khalid Sheik Mohammed, one of bin Laden's top lieutenants, began plotting what was referred to as the "planes operations," and in 1999 bin Laden gave the go-ahead for the plan. In late 1999, al-Qaeda began training and instructing those that would be involved in the 9/11 attacks in Afghanistan. In the summer of 2001, US intelligence suggested with increasing urgency that a "spectacular" attack against the US or Israel was increasingly likely.<sup>10</sup> In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, suspicion fell upon Iraq due to the sophistication of the attacks, but the Bush administration quickly realized that Iraq's government was likely not behind the attacks.<sup>11</sup> In a speech on September 20, Bush pinned blame for the attacks on Osama bin Laden and al-Qaeda, and warned the Taliban that they would "share the fate [of al-Qaeda]." <sup>12</sup> In response to the 9/11 attacks, NATO invoked Article V for the first time in the military alliance's history, meaning that the attacks on the United States were considered an attack on all NATO members.<sup>13</sup> On the 21<sup>st</sup> of September, the US began planning for an invasion of Afghanistan. The US would build a coalition with the

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<sup>8</sup> Thomas H. Kean, et al, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 125.

<sup>9</sup> Kean, et al. (2004), 129.

<sup>10</sup> Kean, et al. (2004), 258-261.

<sup>11</sup> Kean, et al. (2004), 335-336.

<sup>12</sup> Kean, et al. (2004), 337.

<sup>13</sup> "Collective Defense - Article 5."

Northern Alliance, using CIA operatives, Special Operations forces, and airstrikes to drive the Taliban from power. This would be followed by a conventional invasion of the country by a multinational coalition.<sup>14</sup>

On October 7, the United States and the United Kingdom launched air strikes and Tomahawk missile strikes against Taliban and al-Qaeda targets in Afghanistan. The US sent in CIA and Special Operations teams on horseback, meaning that the initial invasion of Afghanistan commenced with what Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld termed the “first American cavalry charge of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.”<sup>15</sup> Most of the fighting on the ground was conducted by Northern Alliance forces. Major cities such as Mazar-i-Sharif and Kabul fell quickly to Northern Alliance/US forces. The top al-Qaeda and Taliban leaders, including Osama bin Laden, hid in underground complexes in the mountainous Tora Bora region along the Afghanistan-Pakistan border. The United States heavily bombarded the region with B-52 strikes, and a combined force of Northern Alliance fighters and US Special Forces converged on the suspected hideouts. However, Osama bin Laden and other top al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership escaped through the mountains. US commanders were blamed for allowing him to escape, and for not sending more US forces at a critical time. The failure to capture bin Laden at Tora Bora was later seen as one of the biggest tactical failures of the early Afghan campaign.<sup>16</sup>

By the end of 2001, the Taliban was largely expelled from positions of political authority in Afghanistan, and planning for a new government commenced. In December 2001, prominent Afghans met in Bonn, Germany to establish an interim government

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<sup>14</sup> <sup>14</sup> Thomas H. Kean, et al, *The 9/11 Commission Report*, 337-338.

<sup>15</sup> Brian Dickerson, *Adaptability – a New Principle of War*, 13.

<sup>16</sup> Scott Shane

headed by Hamid Karzai.<sup>17</sup> The Bonn Agreement also led to the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which soon came under NATO supervision and gradually expanded in an attempt to provide security throughout all of Afghanistan. In June 2002, a “loya jirga” or grand assembly, formed in Afghanistan to create a transitional government and pave the way for eventual national elections. Hamid Karzai was chosen to lead the transitional government, which led the country until national elections in 2004. The United States and the international community began to seriously contemplate how to best establish a new government in Afghanistan that would embody liberal, democratic norms and deny the Taliban or al-Qaeda space to operate and plan new attacks against the West. NATO took responsibility for securing Afghanistan both before and during the presidency of the democratically-elected Hamid Karzai. However, the Taliban proved to be much more adept as an insurgent force than as a governing regime. By the late 2000s, the Taliban had seriously begun to undermine Afghan security and pose an existential threat to the Afghan state. In 2009, newly-elected President Obama decided to send 30,000 additional US troops as part of a temporary surge to help fight back against the Taliban advance. While American and NATO (mostly British and Canadian) troops succeeded in forcing back the Taliban in some areas, particularly in southern Afghanistan, the insurgency was not defeated, and the resulting stalemate cost NATO and the US much blood and treasure. Following the drawdown of Western troops in the country, particularly after the official end of NATO’s combat mission, the Taliban has achieved a series of victories. They have wrested control of much of southern Afghanistan from the Afghan government, and briefly took control of a

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<sup>17</sup> United Nations. *Agreement on Provisional Arrangements in Afghanistan Pending the Re-Establishment of Permanent Government Institutions*

major city for the first time since they were driven from power with their capture of Kunduz in late 2015. Many analysts predict that following the departure of the last of Western forces from the country, Afghanistan will return to civil war, with rival political factions and warlords fighting over swathes of the country.<sup>18</sup> With the viability of the democratic Afghan state seriously in question, it is necessary to examine the origins of state-building in the country.

Understanding neoconservatism as articulated by the Bush administration is vital to understanding the drive behind the desire to build a viable Afghan state. A basic knowledge of neoconservatism is also important as a background for this project's literature review. The two central schools of thought on state-building in the Afghan conflict exist in reaction to many of the central assumptions made by the Bush Administration. By understanding neoconservatism, it is much easier to understand the point of departure for the two main schools of thought examined later in this paper. The national security ethos of the Bush Administration was unique, and the decision to embark on state-building in Afghanistan was steeped in the political philosophy of top administration officials and the commander in chief.

It would be an oversimplification to say that the Bush administration believed that as long as the Taliban was deposed and defeated militarily, a viable Afghan state would emerge. However, in providing a brief understanding of neoconservatism as articulated by the Bush administration, it is easier to understand why many within the administration assumed that building a viable Afghan state would be a smoother process. One of the

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<sup>18</sup> Dan De Luce and Paul McLeary

most important authors associated with neoconservatism is Francis Fukuyama. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, Fukuyama was considered one of the country's foremost neoconservative intellectuals. He helped to develop what came to be known as the "Reagan Doctrine," but became a strident critic of George W. Bush Administration's foreign policy over the course of Bush's two terms. In *America at the Crossroads*, Fukuyama lays out his vision of what neoconservative foreign policy should be, and argues that the Bush Administration mutated neoconservatism beyond recognition.

Fukuyama argues that neoconservatism came into cohesion during the Cold War, as a competing philosophy to the strategic realism practiced by Henry Kissinger and other realist thinkers. The neoconservative philosophy crystallized in the 80's with the "Reagan Doctrine", which involved what Fukuyama terms a "re-moralization" of the Cold War, which involved viewing the conflict through the lens of good and evil.<sup>19</sup> In the 1990's, neoconservatism became opposed to the types of humanitarian intervention or perceived state-building that was done under the Clinton administration.<sup>20</sup> Although the state-building projects of the Bush Administration later dwarfed anything done by the Clinton Administration, neoconservatives viewed the relatively modest state-building efforts of the 90's as pointless, and very dissimilar to the hard power the neoconservatives sought to project on the global stage. A number of influential neoconservatism thinkers, such as William Kristol, argued that humanitarian interventions did not go far enough in efforts to contain the actions of what later became

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<sup>19</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, 38.

<sup>20</sup> Fukuyama. (2006), 41.

termed “rogue states.” Fukuyama identifies Bill Kristol as one of the chief intellectual architects of neoconservatism as articulated by the Bush administration, and it is worth examining some of Kristol’s work in order to understand some of the ideas behind what later became known as the “Bush Doctrine.”

The 2000 book *Present Dangers*, edited by Robert Kagan and Bill Kristol, attempts to articulate the intellectual underpinnings of many of the neoconservative policies that later would be enacted by the Bush Administration towards Afghanistan and other nations. Kagan and Kristol reject many tenets of liberal interventionism and realism, and argue in favor of regime change and frequent military intervention as cornerstones of what they view as the ideal American foreign policy for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. They argue that a dominant United States that does not hesitate to project force will keep threats to regional stability in check, and make rogue states seriously question whether causing geopolitical conflict is worth the consequences.<sup>21</sup> They also contend that the United States made serious mistakes by not acting to remove Saddam Hussein from power following the 1991 Gulf War, and by not compelling NATO to topple the Milosevic regime in the late 90’s. They state,

Those who believe such efforts would have been impossible to implement, or who caution against the difficulties of occupying and reforming such countries...may wish to reflect on the American experiences in Germany and Japan...it is absurd, and in the event self-defeating, not to complete the job [of occupying and reforming].<sup>22</sup>

While Kagan and Kristol do not use the term “state-building” in this context, it is fairly obvious that by occupying and reforming, they are advocating for the same type of

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Kagan and William Kristol. *Present Dangers: Crisis and Opportunity in American Foreign and Defense Policy*, 16.

<sup>22</sup> Kagan and Kristol. (2006), 19.

large scale state-building that would occur just a few years after the publication of their book. They frame their advocacy of such “occupy and reform” projects as vital for global security, but also as part of a larger effort to unify the world behind a liberal and democratic order. In a chapter in the book penned by James W. Ceasar, the broad neoconservative goal for the new century is described as follows, “In no sense does the end of the Cold War mark the end of history. Its conclusion on terms so favorable to America sets the stage for the next phase in further extending the benefits of free government to ‘the whole human race.’”<sup>23</sup> By “free government,” Ceasar is clearly referring to democracy, rule of law, and other liberal values. The views found in this book tend to be favorable to the concepts of state-building and worldwide democracy promotion, but it is important to note that many of these ideas were considered relatively radical for neoconservatives at the time of writing. Obviously, liberal democracy is not a style of government that is the exclusive domain of the West, but many neoconservatives believe that it is the interest of the US to force liberal democracy on other states, rather than allowing it to develop organically.

Many neoconservatives were opposed to large scale state-building projects prior to 9/11. During the 2000 campaign season, George W. Bush stated, “I don’t think our troops ought to be used for what’s called nation-building. I thought our troops ought to be used to fight and win wars.”<sup>24</sup> Three years later, the United States had embarked on two massive state-building projects in Afghanistan and Iraq, and would expend thousands of American lives and trillions of dollars attempting to build centralized democracies in both

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<sup>23</sup> James Ceasar, “The Great Divide: American Interventionism and its Opponents,” 31.

<sup>24</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, 46.



countries. Fukuyama distinguishes the Bush Doctrine as separate from the broader neoconservative school of thought. He identifies four tenets of the Bush administration's foreign policy: preemption, regime change, unilateralism, and benevolent hegemony.<sup>25</sup> After 9/11, the focus shifted from state actors to non-state actors as the most pressing national security threat. The Bush administration's response to the threats posed by non-state actors was to become involved in the political process of other countries as a way of combatting these terrorist organizations.

Fukuyama contends that although the neoconservatives such as Bill Kristol leveled strident criticism at many of the US's military engagements during the 1990's, especially under President Clinton, the "success" of military interventions under George H.W. Bush and Clinton led to unrealistic expectations of what war would look like in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Conflicts such as the Gulf War and the interventions in the Balkans and Kosovo set unrealistic expectations of what "high-tech" warfare could accomplish. Fukuyama states, "the success of American military technology in the 1990's created the illusion that military intervention would always be clean or cheap as the Gulf or Kosovo was...light mobile warfare...can defeat virtually any existing conventional military force, but it provides no special advantages in fighting a prolonged insurgency."<sup>26</sup> 9/11 altered neoconservatism profoundly, as state-building and democracy promotion were no longer thought of merely as important contributions to regional or international security, as articulated by Kristol and Kagan, but were now thought of as vital steps to protect the American homeland.

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<sup>25</sup> Francis Fukuyama, *America at the Crossroads: Democracy, Power, and the Neoconservative Legacy*, 7.

<sup>26</sup> Fukuyama. (2006), 36.

With 9/11, everything changed in the way that the United States approached national security policy. With the spectacular nature of the attacks on mostly civilian targets, the ever largest attack on US soil provoked an understandably emotional response. Any American enough to remember 9/11 can testify to the feelings of shock and anger that roiled the nation following the attacks. This emotion extended to the highest levels of government. In *Decision Points*, George W. Bush's autobiography, Bush spells out his belief that the "War on Terror" would be a multinational battlefield to combat any perceived threats to the American homeland. He states, "It was clear the terrorists had interpreted our lack of a serious response [to earlier terrorist attacks] as a sign of weakness and an invitation to attempt more brazen attacks...after 9/11, I was determined to change that impression."<sup>27</sup> Bush states that the initial actions taken in Afghanistan against al-Qaeda and the Taliban were designed to send a message to other adversaries, such as Saddam Hussein, and that the US was seriously committed to combatting any perceived threats to the homeland or to American interests. In a few short years, the project in Afghanistan would morph into something much broader than a display of "shock and awe" designed to scare the enemies of the US into submission. The Bush Administration came to view the War in Afghanistan as a massive state-building operation aimed at fundamentally altering the political and societal structure of Afghanistan in an effort to ensure that no groups considered hostile to the United States would be able to operate in the country.

The initial military actions in Afghanistan did not resemble the massive invasion of American ground forces that took place two years later in Iraq. The US utilized

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<sup>27</sup> George W. Bush. *Decision Points*, 191.

bombardment from the air and sea on Taliban and al-Qaeda positions, paired with CIA and Special Operations teams, which provided support to the Northern Alliance. Within two months, the Taliban had ceased to control any part of Afghanistan, and the Afghan people experienced what Bush terms, “the thrill of liberation.”<sup>28</sup> Bush quickly changed his tone on the value of state-building. In *Decision Points*, he states,

We had liberated the country from a primitive dictatorship, and we had a moral obligation to leave behind something better. We also had a strategic interest in helping the Afghan people build a free society. The terrorists took refuge in places of chaos, despair, and repression. A democratic Afghanistan would be a hopeful alternative to the vision of the extremists.<sup>29</sup>

Bush explains that his earlier criticism of state-building was rooted in concerns over US participation in multilateral peacekeeping roles.<sup>30</sup> By defining state-building in Afghanistan as a strategic and moral necessity, he attempts to fit state-building within the neoconservative approach to foreign policy. Neoconservatism takes the view that liberal, democratic values are an intrinsic part of human nature. By removing authoritarian governments, people will naturally rise in support of a democratic government. The Bush Administration drew much of its foreign policy on moral authority based on a clear divide between forces of universal good and evil, much as neoconservatism 20 years earlier had cast the Cold War in such terms. Despite Fukuyama’s assertion that the Bush Administration practiced a foreign policy that deviated from traditional neoconservatism, the absolute rejection of many realist principles in favor of a belief in spreading liberal values such as democracy is in line with earlier efforts by neoconservatives to morally code geopolitical conflicts.

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<sup>28</sup> George W. Bush. *Decision Points*, 204.

<sup>29</sup> Bush. (2010), 205.

<sup>30</sup> Bush. (2010), 205.

One of the chief objectives of the initial stages of the Afghan conflict was to demonstrate a core tenet of the Bush Administration's reformulation of neoconservatism: The United States would no longer make a distinction between terrorist networks and states that permitted terrorism within their borders. Intrastate issues became a fundamental concern of the Bush Administration's response to the 9/11 attacks. In his autobiography *Known and Unknown*, Donald Rumsfeld states,

Though the President wanted to strike directly at the terrorist groups that had organized the attack, actionable intelligence was scarce. But we did know the location of states that were instrumental in supporting the international terrorist network – and we also had the means to impose costs on those regimes. Afghanistan's Taliban regime, Syria's Bashar al-Assad, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, and the clerical rulers of Iran were now on notice: Bush had announced that the costs for state support of terrorism had just gone up.<sup>31</sup>

By conflating states that tolerated terrorist organizations within their borders with the geopolitical objectives of terrorists operating independently, Bush hoped to compel “rogue states” to address perceived threats to the American homeland, or risk a doomed military conflict with the United States. In his 2002 State of the Union address, Bush declared, “So long as nations harbor terrorists, freedom is at risk. And America and our allies must not and will not allow it.”<sup>32</sup> Following the 9/11 attacks, Bush believed that the US had a larger mission in Afghanistan beyond simply striking at those directly responsible for the terrorist attacks. The American response had to go far beyond what Bush called “[putting] a million dollar missile on a five dollar tent.”<sup>33</sup> In the new recalibration of neoconservatism, it was in the US's strategic interest to demonstrate that any political project connected with a terrorist group was bound to fail. Any political

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<sup>31</sup> Donald Rumsfeld. *Known and Unknown: A Memoir*, 346.

<sup>32</sup> George W. Bush, “2002 State of the Union Address.”

<sup>33</sup> George W. Bush. *Decision Points*, 13.

organization, whether a state or a non-state actor, that backed terrorist groups would be forced to drop their support for terrorists hostile to the US, or be faced with imminent destruction through military force. The Taliban needed to be discredited not only as a supporter of al-Qaeda and terrorism, but as a viable political faction in Afghanistan.

### **III. State-Building in Afghanistan**

When reflecting on state-building in Afghanistan, it is important to understand the enormous undertaking involved in the construction of a state, especially by an external actor such as the United States. State-building is generally understood as the construction of a centralized political entity in another country as a means of carrying out specific policies. A useful text in understanding the official US position on state-building is *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, a manual published in 2009 by the US Institute of Peace in conjunction with the US Army Peacekeeping and Stability Operations Institute. This is a manual designed to serve as a comprehensive guide on state-building, termed in the text as “Stabilization and Reconstruction,” or “S&R.” While not intended to be specific to any country or armed conflict, the publication is clearly informed by the state-building experiences of the US in Iraq and Afghanistan. The publication lays out five “necessary conditions” that must be met for a reconstructed state to function as a legitimate and effective source of authority in a country. These five conditions, with their corresponding definitions according to the publication, are as follows:

- **Safe and Secure Environment:** Ability of the people to conduct their daily lives without fear of systematic or large-scale violence.
- **Rule of Law:** Ability of the people to have equal access to just laws and a trusted system of justice that holds all persons accountable, protects their human rights and ensures their safety and security.

- Stable Governance: Ability of the people to share, access or compete for power through nonviolent political processes and to enjoy the collective benefits and services of the state.
- Sustainable Economy: Ability of the people to pursue opportunities for livelihoods within a system of economic governance bound by law
- Social Well-Being: Ability of the people to be free from want of basic needs and to coexist peacefully in communities with opportunities for advancement.<sup>34</sup>

The most foundational of these five conditions is that of a “Safe and Secure Environment.” Without the ability to protect its citizens from crime and political violence, a state will not be able to operate as a viable authority. Any given populace needs to be able to live their lives free of violent disruption, and without some baseline level of security in a country, particularly in heavily populated areas, economic and political development cannot occur. Following the initial invasion of Afghanistan, the primary effort was to secure the country through the destruction of the Taliban as the governing faction, and later as an insurgency. Following the establishment of a “safe and secure environment,” the Bush Administration hoped to devote resources to the Afghan national government as imagined by the Bonn Agreement to develop the other four “necessary conditions.”<sup>35</sup> The Bonn Agreement laid the framework for the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which came under the control of NATO in 2002.<sup>36</sup> The Bush administration sought help in building civil society from allies and other countries at an international donors’ meeting in January 2002. At this summit, donor countries pledged \$4.5 billion in reconstruction aid for 2002, with an additional \$4.5 billion over

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<sup>34</sup> USIP, *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, 2-8.

<sup>35</sup> *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction* was not published until 2009, but the Bush Administration followed the same essential format in the reconstruction of Afghanistan following the ouster of the Taliban regime.

<sup>36</sup> George W. Bush. *Decision Points*, 207.

the subsequent five years.<sup>37</sup> US allies focused on different specialized roles in the reconstruction of Afghanistan, but the overarching focus on security took precedent. The US spent over five times as much on war funding in 2002 as was allocated by the donors' conference.<sup>38</sup>

It is important to note that the five “necessary conditions” identified by USIP are centered on fundamentally liberal values. Just laws, competing for power through nonviolent processes, sustainable economic development through market-driven solutions, and a commitment to human rights are all rooted in liberal values typically found in Western democratic countries. The end goal of state-building and reconstruction as envisioned by the United States in the post-9/11 world was to build a state that emulates a Western-style government in many ways. This underscores a fundamental neoconservative assumption about human nature: people will naturally gravitate towards a society built on liberal values. In building a state, the emphasis should be on removing obstacles to the development of liberal institutions, whether in the form of an oppressive regime or a persistent insurgency, and on providing the necessary resources to the host population of a country for reconstruction efforts oriented at liberal end goals. In Afghanistan, the Bush administration believed that the destruction of al-Qaeda and the Taliban would allow for the US and international donors to provide the Afghan people with the means to construct a new, centralized democratic Afghan state.

If the five necessary conditions articulated by USIP and the US Army constitute a broad vision of reconstructing a state in the form of a liberal democracy, the seven

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<sup>37</sup> Afghanistan: Donors pledge \$4.5 billion in Tokyo

<sup>38</sup> Mark Thompson

“cross-cutting principles” offer a more targeted approach on how such a state should be built. These cross-cutting principles are designed to be applicable to anybody or any organization participating in a stabilization and reconstruction process.

The seven principles and their definitions are as follows:

- Host nation ownership and capacity: The affected country must drive its own development needs and priorities even if transitional authority is in the hands of outsiders. Ownership requires capacity, which often needs tremendous strengthening in S&R environments.
- Political primacy: A political settlement is the cornerstone of a sustainable peace. Every decision and every action has an impact on the possibility of forging political agreement.
- Legitimacy has three facets: the degree to which the host nation population accepts the mission and its mandate or the government and its actions; the degree to which the government is accountable to its people; and the degree to which regional neighbors and the broader international community accept the mission mandate and the host nation government
- Unity of effort: begins with a shared understanding of the environment. It refers to cooperation toward common objectives over the short and long term, even when the participants come from many different organizations with diverse operating cultures.
- Security: cross-cutting prerequisite for peace. The lack of security is what prompts an S&R mission to begin with. Security creates the enabling environment for development.
- Conflict transformation: guides the strategy to transform resolution of conflict from violent to peaceful means. It requires reducing drivers of conflict and strengthening mitigators across political, security, rule of law, economic, and social spheres, while building host nation capacity to manage political and economic competition through peaceful means.
- Regional engagement: entails encouraging the host nation, its neighboring countries, and other key states in the region to partner in promoting both the host nation’s and the region’s security and economic and political development. It has three components: comprehensive regional diplomacy, a shared regional vision, and cooperation.<sup>39</sup>

The cross-cutting principles have parallels with USIP’s necessary conditions, but they provide a more comprehensive look at the nuts and bolts of state reconstruction,

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<sup>39</sup> USIP, *Guiding Principles for Stabilization and Reconstruction*, 3-12.



even if the principles remain relatively broad in scope. As with the five conditions, security is considered a prerequisite for the actual processes of state-building to occur. The USIP manual on S&R was written with the benefit of eight years of hindsight on military conflict revolving around counterinsurgency and state-building, and places an emphasis on compelling target nations to develop mechanisms for a society based on liberal values and rule of law.

The American government believed that constitutional democracies could be created from scratch with sufficient commitment to security and by providing the target nation with sufficient resources to create democratic institutions. With time, a democracy would emerge. In Afghanistan, this strategy manifested as the military defeat of the Taliban, or at least the suppression of the Taliban's ability to act as a military or political actor in much of the country, coupled with significant investment in Afghan institutions. In developing the Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police forces, the US hoped to establish its role as a "transitional authority." The training and equipping of Afghan national security institutions would allow for "host nation ownership," and help to provide security. On paper, this seems like a viable strategy. The United States was never trying to create a colony in Afghanistan, and by acting as a transitional authority, rather than as a permanent guarantor of Afghani security, it hoped that Afghanistan would eventually be able to sustain a stable, democratic government with minimal external support.

One of the key components of the international state-building effort was the use of Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). These units were designed to both provide security and to help local Afghan officials with state-building projects. While the US led

the majority of the PRTs, other coalition countries set up PRTs in the relatively secure Northern provinces.<sup>40</sup> For many ISAF countries, “national caveats” prevented their forces from doing much combat, meaning the bulk of state-building through PRTs in volatile regions was done by the US, the UK, and Canada.<sup>41</sup> One of the primary functions of PRTs was to funnel aid to local officials. Sometimes this was direct monetary aid, but often PRTs were involved in infrastructure projects in their assigned provinces. They would help to construct schools, police stations, wells, and other infrastructure projects. However, these projects were heavily criticized by NGOs, Afghan civilians, and even by branches of the US government. In a report, the US Institute of Peace stated, “Schools were built without teachers and clinics without doctors. Multiple wells dried up shallow aquifers. With few, if any, technical criteria, some of the construction was substandard.”<sup>42</sup> Overall, the PRT program was seen by many as far too top-down, and did not involve the requisite “buy-in” from ordinary Afghans. An essay written by William Maley in 2007 in NATO Review stated,

PRTs can also be more interested in their home government’s priorities than those of the Afghan government. It is tempting for PRTs to meet local (and donor) needs through ‘Quick Impact Projects’, and these can on occasion be beneficial, especially if they have been carefully devised with locals. But unfortunately, some of these projects can also prove to be costly, unsustainable white elephants, and reflect a lack of understanding of the complexities of Afghanistan’s diverse micro-societies.<sup>43</sup>

The PRTs were eager to demonstrate capacity for tangible improvements in their respective provinces, but more often than not did not listen to local communities and political leaders to determine what would be best for that particular area. Maley states, “A

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<sup>40</sup> Robert M. Perito, “The U.S. Experience with Provincial Reconstruction Teams in Afghanistan.” 10.

<sup>41</sup> Perito. (2005), 15.

<sup>42</sup> Perito. (2005), 9.

<sup>43</sup> William Maley

good PRT leadership strategy is to spend as much time as possible listening, rather than talking.”<sup>44</sup> Unfortunately, many PRTs did not demonstrate a commitment to addressing the real needs of Afghans within their area of responsibility, and prioritized “Quick Impact Projects.”<sup>45</sup> It was also difficult for PRTs to assess the impact of many of their projects. Oversight of the PRTs was largely non-existent, and their most common official metric used to measure success as detailed in a US Army report was “the number of smiling Afghan children.”<sup>46</sup> The PRTs were not seen as an effective instrument of stabilization and reconstruction, although even an effective implementation of PRTs may not have been enough to compensate for the broader strategic miscalculations of state-building in Afghanistan.

## Literature Review

The literature review portion of this project will be dedicated to exploring the two schools of thought outlined in the introduction. First, the literature review will explore the “do-more” school, which believes that while state-building was done incorrectly in Afghanistan, it is still in the US national interest to remain invested in the country, and to do state-building right. The second chapter of the literature review will explore the do-less school, which believes that the US should have never attempted state building in Afghanistan, and should refocus its mission in the country to be far narrower and to only target direct threats to the United States.

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<sup>44</sup> William Maley

<sup>45</sup> William Maley

<sup>46</sup> Michael J. McNerney

#### IV. First School of Thought: We Should Have Done More

The first school of thought examined in this paper believes that nation-building in Afghanistan would not have been the simple and easy task that the neoconservatives thought it would be, but that more effective state-building is in the US national interest. The do-more school generally believes that had the US made a more decisive commitment to state-building from the start, the security situation in Afghanistan would be much more tenable today. Many people within the do-more camp believe that a sustained commitment of US troops is necessary to protect American interests and to deny terrorist organizations the ability to operate within the country. The do-more school also tends to place a lot of emphasis on the moral responsibility of the United States to prevent Afghanistan from moving away from progressive reforms that have occurred in the country since the fall of the Taliban regime, such as the right of women to attend school.

In providing a holistic critique of the neoconservative state-building in Afghanistan, it is important to understand why the notion that Afghanistan would naturally gravitate towards a liberal democracy lies on some questionable philosophic foundations. It is useful to return to Fukuyama to understand why state-building has usually not gone well for the US (or many other countries). Fukuyama is not part of the do-more school, and does not believe that state-building in Afghanistan was ever in the national interest of the US. However, his concise critique of the neoconservative approach to state-building is extremely valuable in understanding why the do-more school believes that state-building in Afghanistan was done incorrectly. In his 2004 book *State Building: Governance and World Order in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Fukuyama states,

Insufficient domestic demand for institutions or institutional reform is the single most important obstacle to institutional development in poor countries...In the absence of strong domestic demand, demand for institutions must be developed externally. This can come from one of two sources. The first consists of the various conditions attached to structural adjustment program [s] and project lending by external aid agencies, donors, or lenders. The second is the direct exercise of political power by outside authorities that have claimed the mantle of sovereignty in failed, collapsed, or occupied states.<sup>47</sup>

It is clear that the US “claimed the mantle of sovereignty” in Afghanistan through the invasion and the displacement and destruction of existing governmental institutions. The core assumption of the Bush Administration upon the initial invasion was that the US could provide security and exercise political power in a way that would prod the Afghan people into creating “domestic demand” for institutional development based on liberal values. The earlier articulation of the neoconservative philosophy is especially important here: With the assumption that the desire for the development of a liberal society based on democracy and rule of law is a universal human trait, the question of state-building in Afghanistan becomes one of a technical nature, following the recipe later articulated by USIP in order to create a democracy.

Fukuyama identifies state-building as a principal-agent problem. The principal (the state builder) acts upon the agent (a government established by the principal) in order to meet a common set of goals. The principal helps to define a broad set of geopolitical goals, and the agent’s specialization with the conditions “on the ground” helps to implement a shared vision. If one believes that the Afghan national government as established by the Bonn Agreement reflects the will of the Afghan people through democratic processes (first the 2002 loya jirga, followed by national elections), and that

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<sup>47</sup> Francis Fukuyama. *State-Building: Governance and World Order in the 21st Century*, 36.

the agent (the Afghan national government) shares the same goals as the principle (the US government), it would be logical to assume that the Afghan people share the same goals as the US government. The dual belief in democratic development in Afghanistan and the capacity of Afghanistan as a state to act in American interests necessitates a belief that the Afghan people also want to see the Taliban defeated, al-Qaeda destroyed, and a unified Afghanistan that promotes democracy, liberal values, and free markets. While Fukuyama is skeptical of this dual belief, the ability of the US and Afghanistan to eventually establish a successful principal/agent relationship to defeat the Taliban and build a democracy in Afghanistan is central to the ethos of the do-more school.

In order to understand why the United States has failed to use its influence as a principal to compel Afghan society, as an agent, to accomplish a dual set of geopolitical goals, it is useful to turn to Barnett Rubin, a political scientist who is considered one of the US's leading experts on Afghanistan. It is important to note that Rubin believes that the War in Afghanistan is in the national interest of the United States, but that state-building has been done incorrectly and that the United States has not devoted enough funding to the effort to build a viable Afghan state. Although Rubin ultimately believes that the US should have done more rather than less in Afghanistan, his technical expertise is invaluable in understanding why state-building in Afghanistan presents such a challenge. In his book *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, Rubin presents the many challenges that face efforts to build a cohesive Afghan state, and provides a critique of the neoconservative belief that Afghanistan would naturally gravitate towards a liberal and democratic style of governance.

The Bonn Agreement was largely designed to return Afghanistan to the type of highly centralized style of government that had existed in the country prior to the communist coup and subsequent period of war and intrastate violence that followed. Instead of a king, the Afghan government as envisioned by the Bonn Agreement would revolve around a highly centralized government and powerful president. Rubin disputes the claim that Afghanistan had a legacy of centralized political authority that could be drawn upon in the construction of a new state. Rubin states,

Even before the past quarter century of conflict, this highly centralized government had very limited reach...government policing did not extend outside the district center... the state apparatus barely penetrated the country's economy...hence the system who's legal framework is now in effect was a highly centralized but weak state, with very limited penetration into the society and scope for policy making and implementation.<sup>48</sup>

Afghanistan is not a country that has a history of political institutions having much impact on people's day-to-day lives. Outside of major population centers, much of the country has been governed by tribal laws and customs that have largely remained unchanged for hundreds of years. Rubin explains that the centralized Afghan government has traditionally been thought of by most Afghans as the spoils of war for whatever political faction was able to establish a sufficient monopoly of force. He states, "No one saw the construction of states as a means to express the identity or to protect the rights of those that lived in them. States were organizations through which conquerors exercised control over population and territories."<sup>49</sup> The character of Afghanistan simply has never been conducive to the construction of a centralized national state that permeates the economic and political landscape of the entire country. The "domestic demand," as

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<sup>48</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 110.

<sup>49</sup> Rubin. (2013), 112.

Fukuyama terms it, was not present in the country when the Bush Administration and the international community set up a new Afghan national government in 2002.

One of the core elements of the state-building project in Afghanistan has been the training of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP.) The goal of NATO's Resolute Support Mission has been to shift responsibility for a "safe and secure environment" in Afghanistan to local forces. This also allows for "host nation ownership and capacity," as almost all of the actual combat since 2013 has been conducted by Afghan security forces. Training and equipping the Afghans to combat the Taliban has been at the core of President Obama's Afghanistan strategy, and the recent decision to extend US troop presence through 2017 is emblematic of the problems the United States has encountered in attempting to build viable Afghan security forces. Rubin states,

Such [security] operations make use of the same types of resources as other processes of state building: coercion, capital, and legitimacy. The core tasks of security provision are peacekeeping...dismantling irregular militias that compete with the state's monopoly of coercion (demobilization, disarmament, and reintegration, or DDR); and building new security forces, called Security Sector Reform (SSR), which enables the state to exercise that monopoly of coercion. Completion of DDR and SSR allows the international security force to depart. These tasks are essential for developing legitimate rule, as they permit...the 'extrusion' of violence from politics and administration.<sup>50</sup>

Rubin echoes many of the themes articulated by Fukuyama, but he introduces a new term: the "monopoly of coercion." In developing a "safe and secure environment," the state must compel those that would seek to destabilize a country through violence or those who would use violence to carry out political goals to desist such actions. A state's security forces must ultimately be under the command of one single central government

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<sup>50</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 184.



in order for that government to have a legitimate claim on a monopoly of political power. Rubin contends that such a claim has been impossible thus far in Afghanistan, as he categorizes Afghanistan as having a “high degree of accumulation and a low degree of concentration,”<sup>51</sup> meaning that Afghanistan has many well-armed groups with limited central control exercised over them. Afghanistan remains a largely tribal society, and much of the military and political power remains with warlords who are more often than not ambivalent to the strategic goals of the Afghan national government and to those of the US. The Afghan national government must be able to claim legitimacy over its territory through military might, requiring a significantly larger investment by the US in the DDR realm. In Rubin’s view, as neither al-Qaeda nor the Taliban were included in the Bonn Agreement, they have been considered actors outside of the government’s monopoly on coercive force, and have to be defeated militarily. Rubin recognizes that the defeat of the Taliban and the construction of a viable democratic state in Afghanistan will not be easy, but it is necessary and in the national interest of the United States.

While developing the Afghan national security forces has undoubtedly been the centerpiece of the US’s state-building efforts, Rubin examines the development of the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP) as part of a larger problem with state-building efforts in Afghanistan, particularly with regard to funding. He raises the problem of “dual legitimacy,” which can be best understood as an inherent contradiction in efforts to promote a stable and secure state while simultaneously building the capacity of the host country in order to manage that state. While Rubin does not refer to the USIP publication, the essentials of his argument are best understood by borrowing

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<sup>51</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 184.

some of the publication's concepts. It is extremely difficult to promote the five conditions as outlined by USIP while also adhering to the seven principles, particularly those of legitimacy and host country ownership. In any state building exercise, the recipient government and aid donors are both accountable for the governance of the funds that are designed to be used in SSR and other state-building operations. Rubin applies the problem of dual legitimacy to a variety of scenarios, but it is again useful to incorporate Fukuyama's conceptualization of state-building as a principle-agent problem to the Afghan case.

In the realm of developing a viable Afghan economy, the "donor community," meaning the United States and its allies, as well as Western-allied NGO's, have had the goal of promoting a liberal, market-based economy in Afghanistan. This has meant the privatization of many sectors of the Afghan economy, promoting an influx of foreign capital, and importantly, the stamping out the "illicit economy" revolving around opium production, arms trafficking, and other forms of economic production that have been deemed as illegal by the Afghan government. However, this vision clashes with the existing criminalized economy that already supports many tribal and political actors both within and outside of the Afghan national government. Rubin states,

The problem in implementing [liberal, market-based] policies is that they contrast an actually existing economy with an idealized model of a market economy, including government-sponsored social safety nets and markets devoid of 'illicit' power...The 'actually existing economy,' criminalized as it may be, is providing livelihoods for many people, and those who are benefiting the most from that economy are liable either to control the process of marketization or to see it (possibly correctly) as a political plot by their opponents. The criminalized economy is at least nationally owned and operated.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 189.

The example of economic development demonstrates the inherent contradiction found in the seven principles. The legitimacy of the Afghan national government as a democracy does not function as truly emblematic of the peoples' will if they are trying to stamp out modes of economic production that are favored by many Afghans. The problem of the contradiction between the two forces of dual legitimacy engaged in a reconstruction effort permeates all levels of the attempt to build a liberal and democratic Afghan state. In Rubin's view, the construction of a viable Afghan State that would be able to maintain a monopoly on coercive force and be able to promote development after the departure of the US would require a much larger investment, but also a smarter use of funding. Rubin states, "Building a legitimate and capable state...requires transitional governance institutions that incorporate the inescapable need for dual legitimacy transparently, as does governance of a trust fund, rather than in a fragmented and secretive way through ad hoc pressures."<sup>53</sup> Rubin is highly critical of what he views as a lack of investment in Afghan capacity to tackle their country's problems, but moreover, thinks that the neoconservatives simply did not plan for the immense project of state-building.

After spending most of the book articulating the challenges facing state-building in Afghanistan and critiquing the way that the Bush Administration went about building a viable Afghan state, Rubin contends that the United States has attempted to accomplish its strategic goals in Afghanistan "on the cheap." He states, "If the United States wants to succeed in the war on terrorism, it must focus its resources and its attention on securing

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<sup>53</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 190.

and stabilizing Afghanistan.”<sup>54</sup> Rubin calls for a reinvestment in Afghanistan on a much larger scale to address the deep-rooted challenges in building an Afghan state and society. He argues that the US needs to take concrete steps to address a lack of economic development in post-invasion Afghanistan, and contends that in order to develop a legitimate state in Afghanistan, more emphasis is needed on building Afghan capacity, particularly in the realm of civil society. Rubin believes that a central failure of the attempts to build a viable Afghan state was the lack of a trust fund, which could have been used to build local governance capacity.<sup>55</sup>

Another author who provides a useful contribution to the “do-more” school of thought is Ahmed Rashid. In his 2008 book *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, Rashid seeks to articulate why victory in Afghanistan has been so elusive for the United States. Rashid spends much of the text critiquing the handling of Afghanistan by the Bush Administration, and repeatedly slams the Bush Administration’s foreign policy in no uncertain terms. Rashid begins his diagnosis of the fatally flawed neoconservative vision of the War in Afghanistan by articulating how the Bush Administration essentially threw out the federal government’s guides for state-building upon assuming office in 2001. The Bush Administration did not renew President Clinton’s “Presidential Decision Directive 56,” which established guides for embarking on “complex contingency operations” – the term that was in vogue at the time to describe state-building efforts.<sup>56</sup> Like Rubin, Rashid

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<sup>54</sup> Rubin. (2013), 358.

<sup>55</sup> Barnett R. Rubin. *Afghanistan from the Cold War through the War on Terror*, 330.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmed Rashid. *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, 173.

contends that much of the failure of state-building in Afghanistan was due to flaws in the donor regime, and cites Rubin when discussing the failure of the Tokyo trust fund.

Rashid argues that under Bush, USAID became a fund largely aimed at shoveling money at NGOs, rather than as a useful tool in the reconstruction of Afghan civil society and the promotion of economic development. Rashid also alleges that the Bush Administration deliberately pressured USAID to fund evangelical Christian NGOs in Afghanistan as part of a broader political effort of consolidate ties between the Republican Party and the American evangelical community.<sup>57</sup> Rashid argues that one of the main causes of the failed state-building project in Afghanistan was a lack of commitment to the entire enterprise by the Bush Administration. He quotes a security professional as saying, “In manpower and money this was the least resourced American nation-building effort in our history.”<sup>58</sup> In addition to a lack of resources, Rashid argues that the Bush Administration simply didn’t prioritize the Afghanistan conflict as preparations for the invasion of Iraq commenced. He also slams the scope of contributions made by NATO allies, calling some of their contributions to state-building “pathetic and next to useless.”<sup>59</sup> Rashid is useful because he explores the Afghanistan conflict in the wider context of Central Asia, and describes in great detail the neoconservative failures in the region. However, he is mostly descriptive rather than prescriptive, and only briefly mentions in his conclusion his belief that a more sustained effort by the United States to pacify and rebuild Afghanistan is necessary. Rashid serves

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<sup>57</sup> Ahmed Rashid. *Descent into Chaos: The United States and the Failure of Nation Building in Pakistan, Afghanistan, and Central Asia*, 176.

<sup>58</sup> Rashid. (2008), 182.

<sup>59</sup> Rashid. (2008), 204.

as a useful bridge to the school of thinkers that believe the US should not have attempted to state-build in Afghanistan, as he raises the question of whether a massive uphill climb to build a viable state in Afghanistan was ever truly in the national interest of the United States.

The do-more school never contends that the neoconservative vision of state-building would have come to fruition in Afghanistan. They recognize that in hindsight, the assumption that liberal democracy would flourish in Afghanistan solely absent the oppressive Taliban regime was ludicrous. However, the do-more school contends that the failure of state-building in Afghanistan was mostly due to tactical failures in the implementation of state-building, not the overall strategic vision of state-building itself. Key figures in the do-more school, such as Barnett Rubin, have provided particularly strong critiques of the fragmented nature of the state-building effort. The do-more school tends to believe that state-building in Afghanistan lacked a “Unity of Effort,” to borrow a phrase from the USIP Guide to Stabilization and Reconstruction. Universally, the do-more school believes that the Bush Administration made a serious blunder in not committing to a large-scale state-building effort from the very beginning. In short, the do-more school argues that a larger and smarter investment of resources and manpower in Afghanistan could have resulted in a durable and democratic Afghan state.

## **V. Second School of Thought: We Should Have Done Less**

When exploring the intellectual school of thought that argues for a reduced US presence in Afghanistan, it is important to observe the similarities to the do-more school in some of the arguments over the feasibility of US state-building in Afghanistan. Many realists and critics of the War in Afghanistan level criticisms of the neoconservative

vision of state-building that echo the arguments made by Rubin. The realist critics of the state-building effort in Afghanistan agree with Rubin: the neoconservative vision of an easy state-building project in Afghanistan was flawed from the beginning, and the Bush Administration never realized the immense scale of resources that would be required to develop a democratic Afghan state. The key divergence between the “should have done more” and “should have done less” schools of thought does not revolve around a disagreement over how wrong the neoconservatives were, it revolves around whether doing state-building correctly in Afghanistan was ever possible at all, and whether it is in the strategic interest of the United States to continue its attempts to state-build within the country. The do-less school tends to include thinkers who are more realist in their international relations worldview. Many people within this school believe that the US’s only interest in the country is the prevention of further terrorist attacks against the West, and that the best way to accomplish that mission is to withdraw from the country except for forces dedicated to counterterrorism.

Richard Haass is a former US diplomat who served in a number of different administrations, and has been president of the Council of Foreign Relations since 2003. He has written extensively on American foreign policy, particularly with regard to state-building. While the bulk of his writings over the past fifteen years have dealt with Iraq, he has written some useful insights on Afghanistan that serve as an introduction to the school of thought that argues that state-building in Afghanistan was never in the strategic interest of the United States. Haass explores the Afghanistan conflict in the preface to his book *War of Necessity, War of Choice*, stating,

Afghanistan was for years the unconventional war; for many Americans and others it was (unlike Iraq) a good war. It was also (in the immediate aftermath of 9/11) a war of necessity, waged to oust a government that was aiding and abetting terrorists who had attacked the United States and might do so again...Somewhere along the way, though, Afghanistan changed from a war of necessity to one of choice...The United States had opted to become a protagonist in Afghanistan's civil war.<sup>60</sup>

Haass views the War in Afghanistan as a conflict divided into necessary and optional historical components. The necessary part of the war was directly targeting those that had just attacked the US homeland (al-Qaeda) and removing the regime that had sponsored al-Qaeda from power (the Taliban government). However, it became a war of choice as the US's goals shifted from impeding the ability of those who had attacked America to do so again to propping up a new democratic government and fighting against a Taliban insurgency. Haass argues that an extended investment in state-building in Afghanistan is not in the US's strategic interest, as the claim that without US involvement Afghanistan will become a terrorist haven again is not entirely accurate. There are a number of states with vast swathes of territory that are under the control of terrorist organizations or in which such organizations are free to operate. Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Somalia, and other countries contain spaces where terrorist organizations have supplanted the state as the chief source of political authority.

Haass never argues that combatting the Taliban is inherently wrong, or that the US does not have any interests in the country. He argues that the current strategy has not worked, it is unlikely that the US could completely destroy the Taliban and promote a democratic, liberal government in Afghanistan, and that it is not worth the huge investment to try. He states in *Foreign Policy Home Begins at Home*, "Success in

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<sup>60</sup>Richard Haass. *War of Necessity: War of Choice*, xx-xvi.



Afghanistan is beyond reach, if by success is meant bringing about an Afghanistan that is on a long term path to stability, prosperity, and democracy. I would also argue that the United States does not have a vital interest in accomplishing all this, US interests in Afghanistan (such as promoting a more tolerate Afghan society) are real but less than vital, as well as difficult to act on.”<sup>61</sup> Framed within the context of a larger argument that the United States should spend less on fighting wars and more on domestic projects, Haass’s argument boils down to a cost/benefit analysis. He recognizes that any attempt to achieve the type of liberal state articulated in USIP’s five conditions would entail an enormous expenditure of national blood and treasure, and he simply does not believe that the United States will minimize threats to its interests through state-building to justify the costs.

This argument is echoed by other realist scholars, such as Stephen Walt. In an article in *Foreign Policy* published in early 2014, Walt seeks to articulate the “Top 10 Mistakes” made by the United States in the Afghan War. Walt echoes the criticism of other scholars, pointing to tactical failures such as the inability of the US to decimate al-Qaeda leadership at the Battle of Tora Bora, as well as larger strategic failures such as the decision to invade Iraq and divert resources that could have been better used in the Afghan conflict. Ultimately, Walt concludes that the root of the United States’ failure to achieve victory in Afghanistan was due to what he terms, “strategic contradictions.”<sup>62</sup> He states,

The United States and NATO couldn’t win without a much larger investment of resources over a much longer period, but it just wasn’t worth that level of investment...building a new Afghan state and fighting a counterinsurgency war

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Haass. *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*, 117.

<sup>62</sup> Stephen Walt. “The Top 10 Mistakes Made in the Afghan War.”

required outsiders to pour billions of dollars into an impoverished country, but the flood of poorly managed money merely fueled corruption and ensured that much of the aid money was wasted.<sup>63</sup>

Walt shares many of the same critiques as Barnett Rubin, as he believes that the war in Afghanistan had a poorly defined strategic mission from the start, and that the aid flowing into the country was poorly managed with little oversight, and often disbursed with contradictory aims. Walt seems to concede in this article and others that victory in Afghanistan was theoretically possible, but not worth the investment. In a separate Foreign Policy article, Walt claims, “The key problem was essentially structural: US objectives in Afghanistan could not be achieved without a much larger commitment of resources, but the stakes there simply weren’t that level of commitment. In other words, winning wasn’t worth the effort it would have taken.”<sup>64</sup> While state-building was executed poorly in Afghanistan, Walt does not believe that it would be a worthwhile investment for the United States to achieve victory by spending huge amounts of blood and treasure on the military defeat of the Taliban and the construction of a viable Western-style democratic state in Afghanistan.

Walt argues that those who argue that the US has a strategic interest in preventing Afghanistan from again becoming a “safe haven” for terrorists striving to strike the American homeland are wrong in their assumption that defeat in Afghanistan would result in an al-Qaeda resurgence. He contends that the Taliban does not share the same goals as al-Qaeda, and does not strive to attack American interests outside of Afghanistan. Walt describes the chief motivators of the Taliban insurgency as “the political disempowerment of Pashtuns and illegitimate foreign interference in their

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<sup>63</sup> Stephen Walt. “The Top 10 Mistakes Made in the Afghan War.”

<sup>64</sup> Stephen M. Walt. “The REAL Reason The U.S. Failed In Afghanistan.” *Foreign Policy*.

country.”<sup>65</sup> He argues that even if the Taliban were to retake political control of Afghanistan, or enter government through some sort of power-sharing peace agreement, the United States would not be on their “to do” list. Furthermore, Walt argues that al-Qaeda and other terrorist networks can plot attacks from anywhere, observing that the bulk of the planning for the 9/11 attacks was conducted by an al-Qaeda cell based in Hamburg, Germany.<sup>66</sup> It is impossible to fight a military campaign against an ideology, and al-Qaeda is able to formulate plots in a variety of different locations around the world. Walt contends that Afghanistan is an impractical location to train for large scale terrorist attacks, and if the United States were to detect terrorist plots, it could easily take targeted action against al-Qaeda or other terrorist networks operating in Afghanistan.

Jack Fairweather is another author who critiques state-building and endorses a far more limited mission for the United States in Afghanistan in favor of state-building. In *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War or the Peace in Afghanistan*, Fairweather seeks to “[refute] the long-held notion that the war could have been won with more troops and cash.”<sup>67</sup> Fairweather identifies many of the same tactical mistakes that other authors have identified, such as the failure of the US to decapitate al-Qaeda at Tora Bora, and the lack of communication between the new Afghan government, the UN, and the donor regime, which he terms a “miniature American government.”<sup>68</sup> Fairweather points to the plan to repair the Kajaki hydroelectric dam as a specific example of the lack of communication between the various organizations attempting to rebuild Afghanistan. In

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<sup>65</sup> Stephen M. Walt. “The ‘Safe Haven’ Myth.” *Foreign Policy*.

<sup>66</sup> Walt. (2009).

<sup>67</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, Dust Jacket.

<sup>68</sup> Fairweather (2013), 98.

2003, the new US ambassador to Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalizad, slated \$20 million to study the repairs that would be necessary for the dam, with the repairs themselves estimated to amount to \$125 million. Unbeknownst to the Americans, the new finance minister (and current president) of Afghanistan, Ashraf Ghani, had already conducted a study on the necessary repairs and found that they would cost only \$500,000.<sup>69</sup> The lack of communication between the US and Afghan authorities consistently hampered the state-building project.

However, beyond the critiques of overall strategic goals in Afghanistan, and his criticism of the national Afghan government, Fairweather is extremely important in understanding why building a viable democracy in Afghanistan was impossible on the local level. He contends that the Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) were instrumental in the international “mission creep” of moving from solely targeting al-Qaeda and the Taliban to a full-on state-building enterprise. Fairweather examines a number of examples of flawed efforts to reconstruct Afghanistan on the provincial level, and uses these examples to illustrate the larger theme about a lack of credible partners within Afghanistan to work with.

One of the more interesting examples Fairweather points to is that of Helmand province, where reconstruction was led by the British, rather than the Americans (at least initially). Before diving into the flawed reconstruction effort in Helmand, it is worth examining Fairweather’s blistering critique of the contributions of other NATO countries to the Afghan conflict. As the security situation in southern Afghanistan deteriorated in

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<sup>69</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 101.

2005, the NATO-led ISAF force deployed throughout Afghanistan to secure the outer provinces. With the exception of the British and the Canadians, most contributing NATO members provided next to nothing in the way of actual combat troops capable of counterinsurgency and state-building.<sup>70</sup> Each contributing country had its own set of national caveats about what its troops could and couldn't do, complicating attempts to develop a cohesive strategy for NATO in the security and reconstruction of Afghanistan. While Fairweather acknowledges that the deployment of NATO forces was "botched," and contributed to the larger failings of the provincial reconstruction of Afghanistan, his examination of the efforts in Helmand provides a glimpse into the hellish experience of trying to turn a fractured tribal society into a functioning extension of a liberal, democratic government.

Upon assuming power in 2002, Hamid Karzai appointed provincial governors who were aligned tribally with him and who would be able to leverage their existing connections to the tribal dynamics of each province in order to achieve some degree of stability. In Helmand Province, the appointed governor was named Sher Mohammed Akhundzada. Fairweather states,

Some believed [Akhundzada] was ruthless, even by Afghan standards. He had a reputation for empowering his tribe over others while extracting retribution on those who opposed them. A private militia believed to be under his control ransacked villages that resisted his rule...the [Akhundzada-appointed] police chief, Abdul Rahman Jan, allegedly used his men to shake down locals at checkpoints and snatch young boys for sex...the governor's intelligence chief and alleged opium impresario was a torture specialist...some diplomats in Kabul speculated that Karzai appeared to have made him governor in of Helmand in part so that Akhundzada could aggressively expand his interest, and by inference, that of the Karzai family, in the opium business.<sup>71</sup>

<sup>70</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 137.

<sup>71</sup> Fairweather (2013), 125-126.

Fairweather uses Helmand as a broader example of a lack of viable partners in the state-building effort made by the PRTs. Corrupt officials like Akhundzada severely impaired the ability of the UK, US, and other countries to enact counternarcotic strategies. While opium has been one of the main sources for the Taliban's income, the number of local officials with a financial stake in the drug has made NATO efforts to destroy the trade virtually impossible. Fairweather contends that a lack of trustworthy local officials contributed to the Taliban's resurgence in the southern provinces, but that the underlying cause of much of the increased violence has been intertribal feuding.<sup>72</sup> Warring tribes and clans fight for power in provincial districts, and seek to install members of their own tribe or clan in positions of local authority. Sometimes, these tribes ally themselves with the Taliban, even if the chief impetus for causing violence has more to do with resolving a longstanding feud than giving al-Qaeda a space to launch attacks on the United States. While it may be safe to assume that any person who chooses to self-identify as part of the Taliban resents the American presence in the country, most Taliban fighters do not want to target the West – their political concerns are mostly localized.

Fairweather argues that the US and its allies never had the ability to solve the intertribal feuding that made provincial reconstruction so difficult, and that the Karzai government was either unable or unwilling to solve the tribal and clan feuds impeding state-building efforts. He categorizes NATO efforts to pacify and rebuild the southern provinces as a pointless endeavor, stating, "All sides appeared to gain by the coming deployment: Karzai got western engagement that would flood the country with billions.

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<sup>72</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 136.

Western militaries got the mission they wanted to establish their credentials. And of course, there was another beneficiary: the Taliban, whose members were spoiling for a common enemy to unite the south.”<sup>73</sup> Fairweather contends that the West went looking for a fight in southern Afghanistan, and they got one. The Taliban was able to exploit existing intertribal tensions and the fear of an occupying enemy to gain thousands of new recruits and inflict massive casualties on coalition forces.

As the insurgency intensified in southern Afghanistan in 2007 and 2008, the US sought to emulate the perceived success of the Iraq surge by dramatically increasing the number of troops devoted to the conflict and putting General David Petraeus in charge of the fight. When President Obama came into office in 2009, the split between the “do-more” and “do-less” camps became a battle within the new administration. The military wanted a surge of troops, but some people felt that the US should largely withdraw from Afghanistan and focus solely on a narrow counterterrorism mission. This alternative was advocated for most strongly by Vice President Biden, who felt that a surge would be a costly mistake. Obama ended up endorsing a surge with strings attached, as the number of troops would increase by 30,000, but would begin drawing down in 2011, with the combat mission ending in 2014. Fairweather argues that it was around the same time that the surge was decided upon that the strategic significance became moot. The 2009 election was a sham, as Karzai and his allies blatantly employed fraudulent tactics such as ballot-box stuffing to achieve victory. Fairweather states, “The 2009 election was a death knell to international support for the war...[it] exposed the gulf between the idealized western vision that America and its allies had claimed their soldiers were

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<sup>73</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 138.

fighting for in Afghanistan and the corrupt democracy that had taken root there.”<sup>74</sup> For Fairweather, the 2009 election was the final definitive proof that the attempts to construct a viable liberal democracy in Afghanistan had failed. He argues that since 2009, the US mission in Afghanistan has not been aimed at achieving victory, but rather staving off defeat. He argues, “The [Obama] White House appeared to have lost interest in grand notions of what the western doctrine of intervention could deliver to Afghanistan. Yet it had not reached a more limited and realistic assessment of what could be achieved...Obama might not think they could win the war, but at least he wouldn’t be blamed for losing it.”<sup>75</sup>

Fairweather rounds out his critique of US expectations of state-building in Afghanistan by offering a broader criticism of the war in general. Fairweather believes that the war was a bad idea to begin with, but his pointed critiques of the Obama administration’s handling of the conflict indicate that he thinks they have been complicit in extending an overly long conflict. He states that under Obama, the strategy became “They would batter the Taliban into submission, hand over to the Afghans, and get out.”<sup>76</sup> The Obama administration never had any neoconservative delusions about building a liberal democratic government in Afghanistan, nor should they have. Fairweather states, “Obama had never endorsed the interventionist argument that a nation-building program was necessary for removing the threat extremists posed in Afghanistan. Indeed his presidency had taught him that Afghanistan merely needed to be

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<sup>74</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 280.

<sup>75</sup> Fairweather. (2013), 289-290.

<sup>76</sup> Fairweather. (2013), 312.



contained.”<sup>77</sup> In Fairweather’s view, the Obama strategy when it came to Afghanistan has been to kick a failed war further and further down the road, and to prolong inevitable defeat. He agrees that to have state-built in Afghanistan would definitely not have been worth the investment, but his specific take on why the state-building effort was always doomed to fail gives a lot of depth to those that argue that the War in Afghanistan was always unwinnable, and that the state-building effort was unrealizable pipe dream from the start.

While the do-less school agrees with the do-more school that state-building efforts in Afghanistan were plagued with serious tactical problems, their wider critique of state-building as a viable political strategy sets them apart from those advocating for a more intensive US mission in the country. Many in the do-less school do not advocate for a total withdrawal of all American troops, as they recognize that the US has an interest in taking targeted action against those that present a direct threat to the West. The political hero of this school of thought is Joe Biden, who opposed the surge in Afghanistan and advocates for a much narrower strategic mission for the US. The do-less school is not greatly concerned with the nature of the Afghan state, and views the Taliban largely as a regional actor that does not pose a direct threat to the West in the same way that al-Qaeda does. More broadly, the do-less school believes that Afghanistan, which not only has no history of democracy, but no history of a powerful central state, could never be turned into a functioning liberal democracy from the outside without a monumental investment of manpower and resources. For the do-less school, this investment was never worth it. Afghanistan should be viewed by American policymakers as another battlefield in the

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<sup>77</sup> Jack Fairweather. *The Good War: Why We Couldn't Win the War Or the Peace in Afghanistan*, 314.

War on Terrorism, but the US should rely on a much smaller toolkit in order to accomplish its strategic aims in the region.

## **My Analysis**

### **VI. Why the Do-Less School is Correct**

In hindsight, it seems fairly obvious that many of the neoconservative assumptions about state-building in Afghanistan were incorrect. In nearly 15 years of war, a stable, democratic government has yet to consolidate control over Afghanistan, particularly outside of major population centers. Democratic development clearly was more complicated than simply removing the oppressive Taliban regime and creating a secure environment, there are numerous systemic obstacles to the development of a liberal democracy in Afghanistan. As Barnett Rubin observes, traditional structures of political power in Afghanistan tend to be very localized within geographic regions within certain tribes or clans. There is no history of a centralized government having much impact on the lives of most Afghans. The United States badly wants a Jeffersonian democracy to develop in Afghanistan, but it does not seem that many Afghans particularly want a centralized government of any sort dictating how they should live their lives.

The idea that every human being has an intrinsic desire to live in a Western-style liberal democracy is patently absurd, and yet formed the core of the neoconservative belief that state-building would be easy in Afghanistan and in other countries. Ultimately, a conversation about “human nature” as applied to a political context will delve into philosophy. In my judgement, it is not human nature to want a liberal democracy, but it is

human nature to desire a feeling of input in political issues that have a direct impact on one's day-to-day life. In the United States and most other Western countries, this desire manifests itself in a republican system of governance. In Afghanistan, the desire for political input into local issues is less codified, and involves collective input into one's tribe or clan. These tribal decision-making processes are rooted in Islamic law and don't necessarily revolve around votes or democracy. Nevertheless, they do constitute a mechanism for input into localized political issues. The idea that it would be easy to transition from this type of political order to a liberal democracy is flawed. This is not to say that Afghanistan is for some reason incompatible with liberal, democratic values. Afghanistan at some point in the future could become a thriving liberal democracy, but it is a system of government that must develop organically and gradually, not foisted upon the country by an occupying power.

The geography of Afghanistan makes governance very difficult, as exerting a government presence into every isolated corner of the country is next to impossible. Afghanistan is also fractured along ethnic lines, which makes political cohesion especially challenging. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British established the arbitrary "Durand line" between Afghanistan and Pakistan, which became the border between the two states. The Durand Line was designed to provide a clear boundary for the British Raj, but effectively divided the Pashtuns between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The splitting of the Pashtuns is a structural impediment to the development of a cohesive Afghan state, and also a major cause of the continued Taliban insurgency, as fighters and supplies easily traverse the porous border.

Very few scholars would argue that the initial military action against al-Qaeda and the Taliban was a mistake. Following 9/11, the US needed to take action against those that had launched the attack. It was therapeutic in many ways for the country to take decisive action against the perpetrators of a massive attack on the American homeland. The do-more and do-less schools largely agree that the decision to take targeted action against those responsible was the right choice. The point of departure for the two schools of thought is what should have come after the initial targeted response to those responsible for 9/11. Having explored those schools of thought in the literature review, it is worth analyzing the validity of the “safe haven” argument.

The “Global War on Terrorism” or “Overseas Contingency Operations,” the term for counterterrorism efforts under the Obama administration, has truly been a global commitment. The US has taken military action against terrorist networks in the Horn of Africa, Libya, Iraq, and Pakistan, and has utilized military advisors to combat terrorism in countries such as Yemen, Nigeria, the Philippines, Mali, and other countries. The neoconservatives were at least partially correct: in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, transnational terrorist organizations pose an enormous threat to the American homeland, if not greater, than state actors. While legitimate security concerns exist with regard to states such as Iran, North Korea, and Russia, the United States has been focused on non-state actors as the greatest security threat. The non-state threats to the US, which include groups such as al-Qaeda, ISIL, Boko Haram, and other Islamist terrorist organizations, operate outside of the reach of the state. While it is true that terrorist organizations typically are based in areas where the state cannot or does not operate, most terrorist plots have been logistically organized by covert cells. As Stephen Walt observes, much of the planning

for the 9/11 attacks took place in Germany. Recent terrorist attacks in Europe, such as the Charlie Hebdo attacks, December's attacks in Paris, and the recent terrorist attacks in Brussels have not been organized in the tribal areas of Afghanistan, they have been organized on a local level by terrorist affiliates.

The whole point of transnational terrorist organizations is to transcend national borders in carrying out their political aims through violence. Very few security experts now believe that terrorism can be solved sending large ground armies into Asia and the Middle East to state-build. There are not many advocates of sending ground combat forces into Somalia to combat al-Shabbab, or to Libya or Syria to combat the plethora of radical Islamist forces that have taken over large chunks of territory. Some more hawkish politicians have advocated sending ground forces back to Iraq to combat ISIL, but there seems to be little appetite for embarking on another large war in the Middle East. Even with regard to Yemen, where al-Qaeda controls cities and vast portions of the country, there is little talk of sending ground forces to state-build and combat terrorism. Although Afghanistan is where al-Qaeda's leadership was based during the lead-up to the 9/11 attacks, it is not so different from other states that have weak central governments and terrorist networks operating within their borders. Should the United States invade and state-build in every country that has terrorist networks operating within its borders? So far, the Obama administration's answer has been no, with the exception of continued support for a sizeable troop presence in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration has undeniably shifted the focus of the Afghanistan conflict from an open-ended commitment to state-building to a more narrow focus on targeting direct threats to the US. In recent years, the American mission in Afghanistan

has resembled its mission in other countries, with more emphasis on special operations forces and targeted air strikes on high level terrorists. However, the US still supports the Afghan national government with a high level of aid, and has ramped up military operations when necessary, such as when the Taliban temporarily gained control of the city of Kunduz in October of 2015. While the neoconservative political project of working to build a liberal Afghan state has largely been pushed aside by the Obama administration in favor of a more targeted focus on combatting al-Qaeda threats, the recent decision to extend the US military presence through the end of Obama's term in office indicates that the United States does not tend to entirely leave Afghanistan any time soon.

The do-more school often argues that to abandon the state-building project in Afghanistan now would disrespect the progress and sacrifice made by the American military and the Afghan people. No one should dispute the immense sacrifices made by so many, or ignore the progress that has been made in Afghanistan since the ouster of the Taliban regime. Part of the reason why the United States has been unable to effectively "disable, demobilize and reconstruct" the security environment in Afghanistan is that the opposition to the American-backed central government is not a single cohesive force with a uniform set of goals. As Jack Fairweather observes, the conflict in Afghanistan is far more complex than a good guys vs. bad guys type of situation. Violent opposition does come from the Taliban, but many long-simmering tribal feuds have emerged as a destabilizing force. Often, local factions that ally themselves with the Taliban do so mostly out of convenience, not necessarily out of broad anti-Western sentiment. Despite the great sacrifices made by the US, it does not seem like a good idea to continue to sink

American blood and treasure into a conflict that has essentially become a civil war between rival ethnic and tribal factions in Afghanistan.

Exploring state-building as part of a larger principal-agent dynamic allows for a critical examination of some of the broader strategic problems that have contributed to the inability of the US to complete many of its military objectives in Afghanistan. As Fukuyama says, the principal and the agent must share a common set of goals for a shared endeavor to succeed. From the start, this has been a questionable assumption to make about Afghanistan. While the government of Afghanistan does want to see a military defeat for the US in Afghanistan, they simply do not share the same broader set of geopolitical goals as the United States. They do not have the same intense focus on the elimination of terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda, which primarily pose a threat to the West. There is little motivation for the government to make a serious effort to eliminate the drug trade, which provides a livelihood for so many different tribal factions that various political forces in Afghanistan rely on for popular support. Most Afghans simply do not currently envision an Afghanistan that resembles a Western, liberal capitalist country, and there is not much impetus to create the type of society that the West envisions as the eventual future of Afghanistan. It's possible that someday, Afghanistan will move towards liberal democracy through organic means, but until that happens, it is a mistake for the US to attempt to push it upon the country.

The saying "all politics is local" rings especially true in Afghanistan. As Barnett Rubin explains, the challenge of creating any type of cohesive political order in Afghanistan is exacerbated by the fact that outside of the major population centers, most political grievances are localized and focused on issues that don't extend to the entire

country. If the constructed central government is supposed to be rooted in democratic values and respect the political desires of the Afghan people, the fractured nature of the Afghan government should come as a surprise to no one. The tribal dynamics of the country make it extremely difficult for political cohesion around any issue. Many groups within Afghanistan are not sold on the idea of a cohesive nation-state, and swear their allegiance to their local tribe or clan rather than to a centralized government.

Authors such as Barnett Rubin offer a concise summary of why the neoconservative vision of an easy state-building process in Afghanistan failed to come to fruition, but draw the wrong conclusions about what should be done in the country moving forward. The trouble with the do-more school of thought is that while authors such as Rubin clearly articulate why the type of state-building articulated in the USIP Guide to Stabilization and Reconstruction has not worked in Afghanistan, they fail to make a compelling case for why it is in the national interest of the United States to continue to state-build in Afghanistan. In order to construct a liberal state in Afghanistan, the US has entangled itself in a civil war between a myriad of different factions that do not necessarily want to harm the US homeland, but wants to harm the state that the United States has helped to construct in Afghanistan.

The Afghan National Army and Afghan National Police have failed to win the trust of the Afghan people, particularly in the tribal areas outside of major population centers. As explored in the literature review, experts from both the do-more and do-less schools tend to agree that the ANSF have serious problems with corruption. Local police forces allegedly routinely extort local populations, or use their authority to their advantage in feuds between tribes or clans. There have been many allegations that local



police officers use their positions of power to sexually abuse children.<sup>78</sup> The ANSF, the most visible components of the central Afghan State for many Afghans, simply does not portray an attractive alternative to the Taliban or local systems of government, such as tribal councils.

Allowing Afghanistan to develop “host nation ownership” has been so difficult because of the disconnect between what the United States has wanted the Afghan state to resemble and what the people of Afghanistan actually want. Part of the transformation of Afghan society towards the type of state envisioned by USIP has involved the disruption of local economies and existing structures of political power. Barnett Rubin is correct with his analysis that the NGOs and donor countries involved in the reconstruction of the Afghan state failed to unite behind a common political vision, but any Western aid would surely disrupt the illicit economy and the informal power structures that previously existed in Afghanistan. It is hard to imagine that any NGO or donor country would seek to promote policies that supported the illicit opium economy, or opted to promote existing tribal power structures rather than empower a more centralized government.

The difficulty in uprooting and supplanting local structures of governance has also been evident in the attempt to consolidate Afghanistan’s armed forces. As Rubin and the USIP manual observe, a prerequisite for the construction of a liberal, democratic state must be the creation of a safe and secure environment. This is done by establishing the state as the country’s sole guarantor of security by giving it an exclusive “monopoly of force.” The localized political structures in Afghanistan have corresponded with localized

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<sup>78</sup> Joseph Goldstein. “U.S. Soldiers Told to Ignore Sexual Abuse of Boys by Afghan Allies.”

militias and security forces. Historically, tribal groups have had their own armed militias, part of the reason why Afghanistan has been a sore in the side of many empires. The mujahedeen that fought against the Soviet Union were not one unified organization, but comprised of several loosely affiliated militias commanded by warlords. A mujahid's allegiance to their tribe or clan took precedence over any national political vision, and it was not until the mid-1980s that seven of the largest mujahedeen networks united to form a coalition with the shared political vision of expelling the Soviet Union from the country.<sup>79</sup> One of the biggest challenges facing the ANSF in recent years has been desertion. Soldiers and police officers in the ANSF have chosen to desert in order to return home rather than participate in what is increasingly viewed as a hopeless struggle against the Taliban. The problem of desertion is exacerbated by the fact that many Afghan soldiers are unable to provide money to their families unless they bring it to them physically. Low morale in a conflict that is increasingly viewed as unwinnable is also a contributing factor to increased levels of desertion. However, one of the biggest underlying challenges for the ANSF is that many of the soldiers and policeman simply don't have much faith in the national political project in Afghanistan.

The Taliban, with its integration into local villages and support in many tribal areas, is ingrained and localized in ways that the ANSF never has been. The Taliban also has a narrower set of political goals that are far easier to accomplish than those of the ANSF and the Afghan national government. As an insurgency, the Taliban needs to destabilize the Afghan national political process, and interrupt the government's ability to maintain a sole monopoly of force. The Afghan national government needs to

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<sup>79</sup> "Anti-Soviet Mujahedeen." Global Security.

demonstrate that it is not only capable of using coercive force, but is capable of setting up a political project that can meet the needs of its citizens. The Afghan government needs to work towards meeting all five “necessary conditions” outlined by USIP to demonstrate its legitimacy: a Safe and Secure Environment, Rule of Law, Stable Governance, a Sustainable Economy, and Social Well-Being. The Taliban only needs to interfere with the government’s ability to create a safe and secure environment, which they have done quite effectively during the course of the War in Afghanistan, particularly after the departure of NATO combat troops in 2014. The Taliban does not seem to have particularly strong aspirations to govern Afghanistan. While the Taliban was in power, they did not attempt to provide basic services to the people of Afghanistan, and maintained power through sheer coercive force.

An additional challenge to the defeat of the Taliban is the support it receives from Pakistan. Pakistan supported the Taliban prior to 9/11, as it viewed the Taliban as a bulwark against potential Indian influence in the country. Pakistan’s foreign policy largely revolves around its geopolitical rivalry with India, and the country has been obsessed with the idea that India could bring Afghanistan within its sphere of influence, and surround Pakistan along its two longest borders with hostile states. Following the 9/11 attacks, Pakistan renounced support for the Taliban, but many experts have alleged that Pakistan has continued to provide safe harbor for top Taliban leaders, and has not made a serious attempt to combat the Taliban’s influence on Pakistan’s side of the border. The border between Afghanistan and Pakistan bisects the Pashtun ethnic group that provides the base of support for the Taliban, and Taliban fighters move with ease across the border in the mountainous tribal areas.

There cannot be a lasting peace between the Afghan national government and the Taliban without serious input from Pakistan. Relations between Afghanistan and Pakistan have been fraught with tensions, and allegations from Afghanistan that Pakistan has been unable or unwilling to combat the Taliban have resulted in a serious fraying of relations between the two nations. From a realist perspective, preserving the status quo would seem to be in Pakistan's national interest. By preventing the Taliban from retaking political authority in Afghanistan, they deny terrorist organizations such as al-Qaeda the type of safe haven from which terrorist operations could be hatched. Pakistan has also shown a willingness to target al-Qaeda, and to allow American drones and Special Forces to target senior al-Qaeda and Taliban leadership in the tribal areas of Pakistan. By allowing the US to target direct threats to the West, they are able to remain in the good graces of the United States, which is a major benefactor of Pakistan in military aid. At the same time, allowing the Taliban to keep the Afghan government off-balance and unable to consolidate full control over the country means that India is unable to use Afghanistan as a proxy. Pakistan's unwillingness to do more to combat the Taliban represents another major roadblock to the Afghan government's attempts to establish a monopoly of coercive force and to create the secure environment necessary to promote a liberal, democratic government across all of Afghanistan.

Some within Afghanistan have suggested that a federal model of government would be a more effective democratic model that would allow for Afghans who feel alienated from the centralized government in Kabul to gain increased political representation.<sup>80</sup> Critics of the existing parliamentary model argue that too much power is

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<sup>80</sup> Hashmatallah Moslih

vested in the President, and more needs to be done to address the needs of people in rural Afghanistan, particularly ethnic minorities. It is difficult to say what would have happened had the US pushed for a government that delegated more power to a Congress or Parliament, but it is easy to understand why the Bonn Conference resulted in a highly centralized government. The US wanted a strong leader that could elevate the Afghan government and give it the power to crush the Taliban and take over as the chief source of political authority. Obviously, this has not panned out as the US had hoped. So far, giving political power to elected officials in rural Afghanistan has not gone particularly well. Local governments in Afghanistan are rife with corruption and have been ineffective at delivering a viable alternative to the Taliban as a source of political authority in many parts of the country. It does not seem likely that giving more political authority to local governments would cause democracy to suddenly flourish and cause the defeat of the Taliban.

Both the do-more and do-less schools agree that the people of Afghanistan are obviously freer under the Afghan national government than they were under the Taliban regime. No one in the do-less school believes that the people of Afghanistan would be better off under the rule of the Taliban, but after 14 years of war, it is clear that Afghanistan is not going to magically gravitate towards liberal democracy. The conditions for democratic development simply do not exist in Afghanistan, and the disruption of existing economic and political structures has not been welcomed in many parts of a deeply fragmented and conservative country.

## **VII. Policy Recommendation**

The United States needs to recognize that state-building in Afghanistan has not resulted in much other than a huge expenditure of money and a sizeable loss of life. By attempting to construct a liberal democracy in Afghanistan, the United States has ignored many of the regional obstacles to democratic development. However, despite all the obstacles to state-building in Afghanistan, it is no easy feat for the US to completely disengage from the region. There are undoubtedly still high profile threats to the United States that exist along the border between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The US has waged a targeted campaign for the past decade aimed at high-level targets such as senior al-Qaeda operatives. This operation has used drone strikes and Special Forces to carry out a narrow mission against the leadership of terrorist organizations that desire to threaten the US homeland. While the US has not passed up on the opportunity to target senior Taliban leadership, the mission has largely been focused on decimating the leadership of al-Qaeda, which the US has been moderately successful in doing. Despite killing or capturing high profile targets such as Osama bin Laden, Atiyah Abd al-Rahman, and Khalid Sheik Mohammed, many top al-Qaeda leaders remain at large. The new presence of ISIL as an operational force in Afghanistan is also a grave concern for the US, especially with ISIL seeking to simultaneously expand its territory and launch attacks against the West.

Clearly, the US has some interest in retaining a military presence in the region to target organizations that pose a direct threat to the US, as it has done in Somalia, Yemen, Libya, and countless other countries in which the US conducts counterterrorism operations. However, there needs to be a distinction between a counterterrorism mission

(and the accompanying logistical accommodations, such as a military base) and an open-ended fight against the Taliban where the US seeks to enact a systemic political change in Afghanistan by using the military to state-build. The United States needs to draw a clear distinction between terrorist groups that are interesting in perpetrating attacks on the West, and groups with more regional aims, such as the Taliban. However, the US will not be free to conduct counterterrorism operations in a region if the Taliban retakes control of the country's political apparatus. Although the US undoubtedly has serious doubts about how effective the democratic government is as a partner in the fight against terrorism, the Afghan state is unquestionably an American ally. While it would not be wise for the US to continue to be involved in a protracted battle against a Taliban insurgency, it should work to support the Afghan state in a way that focuses on building local capacity to protect the Afghan state. This should not be interpreted as an endorsement that the US needs to logistically support the Afghan military at every level, or to use Afghan forces as a proxy for squashing the Taliban insurgency once and for all, but rather an advocacy for a far narrower mission for the US in the country.

The US does not need the Taliban insurgency to be eradicated in Afghanistan in order to conduct a counterterrorism mission more in line with a narrower strategic vision. The United States simply needs to support the Afghan state and military so that it can retain credible control over major population centers and contain the Taliban. Financial support for the Afghan military will be critical to maintaining the Afghan state's ability to operate as the chief executor of political force in the country. Afghanistan does not have the funds or development necessary to maintain a military capable of preserving the integrity of the Afghan state, and the US and international donors should work to make

sure that the Afghan National Police and Afghan National Army are funded and equipped to prevent the Taliban from taking control of the state. This has broadly been the goal of the US and NATO since the end of the combat mission in Afghanistan and the beginning of Operation Resolute Support. Keeping the status quo in place in Afghanistan is in the US national interest. To do more, to attempt to state-build and turn Afghanistan into a liberal democracy and utterly destroy the Taliban, has not worked for the United States, and is not worth the high cost in blood and treasure. Withdrawing the entire military presence of the US in Afghanistan and cutting off all support for the Afghan government is not feasible either. Maintaining a light footprint in the region, and focusing on a narrow mission of supporting the Afghan military and conducting targeted military operations against high level targets of organizations that pose a direct threat to the West is a medium that allows for the United States to work towards achieving what it set out to do: prevent Afghanistan from being a haven from which terrorist plots can be launched against the US.

Under the framework of this strategy, the United States would not be tasked with constructing an entirely new civil society in Afghanistan, or try to convert the country into a liberal democracy. Working with partners on the ground while simultaneously pursuing a narrow mission of targeted counterterrorism is a strategy that has been pursued by the US in countries such as Somalia, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya among other countries involved in the US's war on terrorism. A clear distinction needs to be drawn in Afghanistan between those that are opposed to the political project of constructing a centralized democratic government in Afghanistan and those that want to attack the United States. These two political visions are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but it



would be an enormous waste of lives and resources for the United States to remain militarily engaged in what has increasingly become a civil war between rival factions in Afghanistan.

## **Concluding Arguments**

As the Afghan Campaign enters its 15<sup>th</sup> year, the time has come to reflect seriously on what the US has hoped to achieve in the country so far, and what its goals should be going forward. Obviously, it is not in the national interest of the US to allow al-Qaeda or other terrorist organizations to use Afghanistan as a launching pad for attacks against the US homeland. The United States needs to take decisive action, when necessary, against individuals or organizations that plan on committing terrorist attacks against the US or an American ally. Recognizing the evolving nature of war and the increased threat to national security posed by non-state actors has been an intrinsic part of the underlying ethos of American national security policy since 9/11. The US has been willing to engage terrorists across the globe, and targeted drone strikes and Special Forces missions have become a hallmark of the Obama Administration's counterterrorism efforts.

A distinction needs to be drawn between targeting direct threats to the American homeland and getting involved in political battles in other countries in an attempt to remake society in the Western image. In Afghanistan, opposition to a centralized, liberal democracy does not necessarily correlate with a desire to inflict terrorist acts on the West. The core argument of the do-more school rests on false binary that equates combatting terrorism with the construction of a liberal democracy in Afghanistan. While the Taliban,

and al-Qaeda are often grouped together by politicians and talking heads on cable news, they have distinctly different geopolitical goals. While the Taliban's ideology is antithetical to many American values, and threatens the security of several American allies and US interests, they do not pose a direct threat to the United States in the same way al-Qaeda does. The Taliban's fight against the government of Afghanistan is much more a local struggle for political domination of a state than part of a larger fight against the West.

Authors such as Barnett Rubin are concerned with the Afghan people, who are unquestionably freer under the US-backed democratic government than under the governance of the Taliban. The debate over US involvement in Afghanistan reflects a broader debate that is taking place in US policy circles: What role should the United States play in working to radically alter other countries as part of a national security strategy? So far, the answer of the Obama administration has been that the US should not embark on any grand quests to transform other countries in the mold of Afghanistan or Iraq, and it is only in the American interest to target more direct threats to the US. The long, expensive wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have shown that a wholesale remaking of the political order in another country is an arduous undertaking. While oppression by a political entity is deplorable in any context, the time has come to recognize that the US does not have the power to solve the political and social ills of every country. The future of Afghanistan must ultimately be left to the Afghan people. It is possible for an outsider to change the political nature of another country through sheer force of will, as the British did in India. It took Great Britain nearly 300 years and an enormous amount of national treasure and soldiers to turn India into a cohesive political movement and to set the stage

for an eventual Indian democracy. Afghanistan is certainly not an American colony, but the lessons of history suggest that a fundamental change in another country's political structure, instituted from the outside, is no easy task. The do-more school recognizes that a successful state-building project in Afghanistan would require a huge intensification of US efforts, as transforming Afghanistan into a liberal democracy was never the easy task the neoconservatives thought it would be.

It does not seem evident that the conflict in Afghanistan justifies a huge increase in expenditure of American blood and treasure in order to solve what boils down to a conflict between two rival political movements with different visions for the country. While the American public seems to be willing to support decisive action against terrorist networks that directly threaten the West, such as al-Qaeda or ISIL, there seems to be little appetite for large-scale state-building operations or the type of large ground war that was the hallmark of the Bush Administration's foreign policy. At this point, an intensification of US efforts in Afghanistan would be extremely challenging logistically, as the vast majority of American forces have already withdrawn from the country. There is no appetite among American allies for recommitment of forces to Afghanistan in pursuit of a state-building project that does not appear to have been very successful so far. If the next president were to decide that an intensification of US efforts in Afghanistan were worth it, he or she would have to battle American public opinion, a lack of support on the international stage, and a general feeling of war weariness across the American political spectrum.

Ultimately, it is simply not worth it for the United States to further invest in state-building in Afghanistan. Engineering a liberal democracy in Afghanistan would be a

titanic struggle, and the benefits to the US do not outweigh the costs. The do-more school is cognizant of the many challenges that state-building in Afghanistan entails, but the conclusion that an intensification of US efforts in the country is in the national interest is unconvincing. While the US undoubtedly should remain vigilant against terrorist threats, and take decisive military action when necessary, it is not the place of the United States to engineer a liberal democracy in Afghanistan, nor is it worth the cost. The US needs to minimize its involvement in attempting to steer the Afghan government in a certain direction (although US support for the Afghan National Security Forces will be critical in denying the Taliban the ability to retake control of the country), and reduce the US troop presence in Afghanistan to the minimum. Any remaining forces in Afghanistan should be devoted to gathering intelligence on al-Qaeda, ISIL, and other terrorist networks that pose a threat to the United States. The US should utilize Special Forces operations and airstrikes when necessary to disrupt terrorist operations. The US cannot be defeated in the fight against terrorism, but the time has come to recognize that attempts to build a liberal democracy in Afghanistan are doomed to fail, and it would be foolish to attempt further state-building. The United States should strive at all costs to avoid becoming the next great power to suffer a humiliating defeat in an attempt to engineer a new political order in the Graveyard of Empires.

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